

Norway Feedback

My research trip to Bergen was a remarkable experience. The trip has opened my eyes to new possibilities both for my current research and for the future. I feel like I have gained valuable insight into not just my research but to what possibilities lie ahead.

Primarily my research focus is ecosystem modelling. I travelled to Norway with the objective of gaining data and insight from field biologists, in order to better model cold-water coral ecosystems. I am pleased to be able to report that this goal was achieved. Lene and Pål Bulh-Mortensen were excellent academic hosts and provided me with a workspace, and access to the data I required. Their expertise allowed me to group the organisms found in the waters surrounding Norwegian cold-water coral reefs into functional groups. Furthermore, I have been able to start analysing several reefs for which I have more detailed observational data. Currently work is underway comparing the Norwegian cold-water coral reefs to each other, first by using multivariate statistical methods based on species assemblage and then based on the functional groups found on the reefs. This will lead into the ecosystem modelling competent of the thesis. Hopefully the lead in will be based on the observation that functional groups are preserved across reefs, thus suggesting that cold-water coral reefs have similar ecological functions regardless of geographical location. This generalisation, should it prove true, will be very helpful in building ecosystem models for reefs in under sampled areas. This is because we would know what functional groups to expect on a reef, thus aiding in filling knowledge gaps in the model.

As researchers who are familiar with the system and have field experience, they were able to make many useful suggestions on sections, comparisons, and methods for my doctorate and I feel like the project is taking real shape now. These suggestions stem from the insight of researchers who have been in the field and observed these habitats. The kind of perspective that they were able to give me is often lost when one focuses on the numbers alone and forgets the organisms and habitats behind them. This whole trip has been very helpful for visualising cold-water coral reefs. I have also gained an understanding beyond what is quantifiable in a model of how these systems function. None of this would have been possible without physically being in Norway and having access to these resources.

Most of my time in Bergen was spent working on data that will be included in my doctorate. However, working with a diverse range of scientists meant that I gained much insight into other fields and projects. Apart from the in-depth information that I got, I gather plenty of general knowledge simply by having lunch with such a diverse range of scientists. From random facts about Norway, to the range of projects that people are working on I feel like I gained much insight from these interactions alone.

In addition to these academic experiences, I was able to experience some of the local culture and history. I evidently chose my travel dates well as my first Friday in Bergen was the 17th of May which was a unique experience. I managed to make time to visit the aquarium, art museums, gardens, the fish museum. I also enjoyed many runs alone

Fjellveien and two up Stolzekleiven and across the top to Fløyen. On paper that list sounds rather long, I feel I should clarify that these activities took place on weekends and after office hours.

The aquarium was very insightful as it allowed me to see some of the organisms that I was working with. The fishing museum was something I only got around to visiting on my last weekend. It helped put into perspective, the amount of research and focus that goes into marine biology in Norway. It was useful to touch base with the history of marine resource utilisation in Norway, their management and marine research.

The people I interacted with in Bergen have changed my perspectives both on my research and on life in general. As a modeller, it is very insightful to interact with people who do field research. They have boarded my knowledge base and adapted my world view. Spending a whole month in Bergen has helped me see both what is good and bad about Cape Town. This might sound like a strange point, but it is invaluable insight when for applying for governmental funding, as I now see different opportunities.